

DANGEROUS MINDSETS:  
AN ANALYSIS OF WHITE LADY BOUNTIFUL  
IN TEACH FOR AMERICA

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Abstract: White women are the majority of traditionally-trained public school teachers in the United States. Though Teach for America (TFA), a prominent alternative teacher certification program, reports greater diversity in their teacher candidate population and better representative of the national student population, the majority of the organization's teachers are white women. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) projects that the public student population will continue to grow more diverse in the future. These statistics bring into question the mindsets of white female teachers who service Black and Brown students in urban areas. Dating back to Catherine Beecher's missionary teachers, white women have acted as a colonizing force to socially, morally, and religiously convert "uncivilized" communities. These missionary teachers represent the legacy of the White Lady Bountiful teacher archetype. The White Lady Bountiful teacher's self-perceived role is to save underprivileged, at-risk students from the plight of their communities. In modern culture, teacher films such as *Dangerous Minds* and *Freedom Writers* illustrate the White Lady Bountiful teacher in urban classrooms of Black and Brown youth. In this paper, I analyze my memories and experiences as a black female Teach for America corps member to evaluate the presence of the White Lady Bountiful teacher archetype in TFA's pre-work materials and "Story of Self" training activity.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Imagine one of the several Hollywood films portraying American public schools, classrooms, and teachers. With the exception of a few (shout out to Morgan Freeman as the innovative and controversial Mr. Clark in *Lean on Me* [1989]), Americans usually picture the blonde Michelle Pfeiffer as Louanne Johnson in *Dangerous Minds* (1995) or the brunette Hilary Swank as Erin Gruwell in *Freedom Writers* (2007). Now, what is usually the plot of these films? I'll wait.

Bright-eyed, white female teacher enters an inner city classroom filled with students with whom she shares limited similarities. She sees that her students are in trouble: gang affiliations, poverty, low reading levels, no motivation for school—the list goes on. She finds her lessons do not reach her students. She must save them. Her perception is that her students need her. As the plot of these films continues, we see the transformation of the student culture and achievement in the white female teacher's transformed classroom: students are smiling and dancing; they trust her; she gets to know them; and she now has changed the trajectory of her students' lives. The characters that Pfeiffer and Swank portray in their respective teacher films represent the mindsets and self-perceived roles of white female teachers around the country. This teacher archetype within the context of multicultural education is known as White Lady Bountiful, a phrase

first coined in 1993 by Honor Ford-Smith and further examined in the work of Helen Harper and Sheila Cavanaugh (1994). This image of a white female teacher surfaced during British imperialism, according to Harper and Cavanaugh (1994) who describe the White Lady Bountiful teacher as:

...having a unique duty to bring civilization to the ‘uncivilized.’ In the early 1800s, her role was to educate British working-class women in religion, morality and hygiene. Exported to the colonies, the ideal of femininity became the white woman, an embodiment of chastity and purity who acted as a ‘civilizing’ force. (p. 28)

Films like *Dangerous Minds* and *Freedom Writers* illustrate the modern representation of the White Lady Bountiful teacher who views their role in the classroom as a savior, holding education as the problem-solver, for minority students in urban classrooms. The gender and racial representation shown in these Hollywood teacher films illustrate an accurate depiction of classrooms in the United States.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports that 76 percent of teachers in public schools during the 2011-2012 school year were women (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). According to predictions by NCES for the 2024 public school student population, the percent of white students in public schools will decrease from the 2012 statistics while the percent of Hispanic and Asian/Pacific Islander students will increase. The percentage of Black students is projected to decrease by only 1 percent in 2024 (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Though the teaching field has become more diverse over the past few decades, these diverse classrooms, usually depicted in high-poverty areas, are more likely to be headed by white teachers. According to NCES

(2015) data, white teachers accounted for 82 percent of the teacher population in the 2011-2012 school year. In high-poverty areas, 63 percent of teachers are white (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Though the White Lady Bountiful archetype can be prevalent in white female preservice and in-service teachers due to the gender and racial makeup of public school teachers in the U.S., alternative teacher certification programs are also susceptible to White Lady Bountiful. Teach for America (TFA), a prominent alternative teacher certification program, reports greater diversity in their teacher candidate population and better representative of the national student population whom their candidates serve compared to candidates in traditional education programs and other alternative certification programs. Although 51 percent of the 2015 TFA national corps identified as nonwhite, 49 percent of the public school population in 2015 was reported as nonwhite (Teach for America, 2016).

As a 2015 alumnus of the TFA Greater Tulsa region, I have witnessed great academic achievements and effective instructional support from the local staff and national organization. I grew up in a predominantly white and small, southern town in Georgia, but I never experienced Whiteness within the arena of diversity and equity training. TFA professional development sessions were my first glimpse into the world of Whiteness and race: white tears, white guilt, and the White savior complex. My experiences as a Black woman from a low-income socioeconomic background and as a minority in TFA shaped my research studies in race and gender in education and teacher education. Though the presence of White Lady Bountiful may seem virtually inevitable in a profession statistically dominated by white women today, I want to use my



experience to truly analyze this teacher archetype in TFA. This analysis grants the opportunity to reflect on my experiences as a black TFA corps member and analyze any prominence of the White Lady Bountiful teacher archetype.

After the completion of my two-year commitment in TFA, I continued teaching at a different school in my region and joined the TFA staff as a part-time Instructional Facilitator and Cohort Leader. Numerous educational scholars, critics, and teacher practitioners critique and discuss the framework and agenda of TFA (Ravitch, 2011; Lefebvre and Thomas, 2017), yet they have not experienced what it means to be a TFA corps member, alumni, or staff member, specifically from the perspective of a Black female. In my continuous affiliation and involvement with TFA, I find it my duty to effectively critique the structures I have seen from my perspective as a former corps member and now alumni and staff member. In order to do so, I first discuss the literature and conversations that ground my research and analysis. This includes a historical context for the White Lady Bountiful archetype and conversations regarding White savior, popular culture, and Teach for America, race and diversity in TFA, and privileged backgrounds of TFA corps members. Then, through memory work methods, I analyze my experiences as a Black female corps member engaging in TFA's 2015 Summer Institute Pre-Work and the Story of Self in order to investigate the following research questions: a) How have I seen TFA address the White Lady Bountiful teacher archetype? and b) What experiences have I had with White Lady Bountiful and white female Teach for America corps members compared to white female teachers from traditional teacher education programs? I find the presence of White Lady Bountiful mindsets, similarly found in White savior teacher films such as *Dangerous Minds* and *Freedom Writers*

within TFA's preparatory framework for corps members and the organization's correlation with Catherine Beecher's missionary teachers. I conclude with a call to Teach for America to reevaluate recruiting practices and introductory framework that fosters true diversity and combats a white missionary mindset that only white teachers, with the help of a book and a few weeks of training, can save Black and Brown students and their communities.

I was instantly intrigued with the White Lady Bountiful teacher archetype, because the description and history of this woman sounded like so many white female teachers I encountered in my experiences as a teacher, both from traditional teachers and TFA corps members. Currently, there is not a plethora of educational research and thought regarding the mindsets and prominence of this particular teacher archetype in teacher education. Yet, as the demographic of teachers grows more white and female and our student demographics continue to grow more diverse, this analysis is pertinent as we ensure all students are equipped with effective, quality, and culturally responsive teachers. As TFA continues to recruit a demographic of teachers who are seemingly meant to supply the high demands of regions, communities, and schools that experiences high teacher shortages and great educational needs, White Lady Bountiful is also an important mindset to analyze in diverse, urban classrooms.

### **Background and Context**

Teach for America, founded by Wendy Kopp, is a non-profit organization and alternative teacher certification program that works towards a current vision that "one day, all children in this nation will have the opportunity to attain an excellent education." The organization recruits corps members for a two-year teaching commitment in low-

income, high-need schools across the nation. Their approach and mission encompasses a catalyst of leadership to create societal change, first in their assigned classrooms, schools, and community. In order to dismantle educational inequities, TFA builds, develops, and supports an influential system of corps member-to-alumni leadership in all sectors, especially education, social justice, law and policy sectors.

Since its founding in 1989, Teach for America's teacher preparation tactics, organizational framework, and overall agenda have consistently been the subject of critique and analysis from education practitioners, scholars, and community members. A few of the critiques target the small amount of teacher preparation training, neoliberalism agenda setting of the organization and its alumni, and the idea that TFA takes the place of traditional teachers and schools. The critiques and conversations have created negative connotations surrounding Teach for America, yet the organization and its corps members continue to maintain a resume of impressive work in their classrooms and communities. Studies by Clark, Isenberg, Liu, Makowsky, and Zukiewicz (2015) and Clark et al. (2013) have evaluated the effectiveness of corps members in promoting student achievement growth compared to experienced teachers in their schools. The 2015 evaluation found that students achieved more than 1.3 years of reading level growth in pre-k through second grade classrooms taught by corps members. Another Clark et al. (2013) study found that corps members' students achieve 2.6 months or more additional math progress in a given year.

Despite the criticism that TFA perpetuates white saviorism by placing inexperienced teachers in classrooms most targeted for state intervention, the organization's foundational model is a very old concept. Though I completed my TFA

corps experience in 2017, I first made the historical connection while reading Dana Goldstein *Teacher Wars* (2014). In the first chapter of the book, Goldstein examines the monumental role of Horace Mann and Catherine Beecher in the feminization of teaching. As Goldstein explained the workings of Beecher's Board of National Popular Education and her missionary teachers, she framed how the model was a "sort of prototype" for TFA. Here, I began to deeply connect the White Lady Bountiful teacher archetype to TFA's mission and model (2014, pg. 29).

Catherine Beecher and the Board of National Popular Education were instrumental in the white feminization of teaching. During the 19th century, the idea of employing women as teachers was first pushed with the benefit of women requiring less salary than the men who already dominated the teaching profession. However, Beecher's work (1837) advocated for the feminization of teaching with an agenda that now deemed a woman's duty as a nurturer to educate and care for children. Women were the best tool to teach, promote, and essentially colonize the western United States with the morals and beliefs of the White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs). Under Beecher's vision, The Board of National Popular Education recruited "well-bred, evangelical young women from the Northeast" and relocated them to establish frontier schools for the uneducated communities in the "primitive" West (Goldstein, 2014, p. 29).

Beecher's missionary teachers and TFA corps members share several commonalities in organizational structures and mindsets. Beecher's teachers were exclusively white women who held racial and economic privilege. According to the teacher demographics previously mentioned, the greatest majority of TFA corps members are white women. Beecher taught the missionary teachers, who held no previous training

or education in the field of teaching, basic pedagogy in a month-long training. TFA requires that corps members have a Bachelor's degree in any field, but usually corps members do not have teaching experience. Though the missionary teachers leave the comforts of their homes and lifestyles in the northeast region of the U.S., they viewed their role as teachers in the West as a sacrifice for the greater good. Goldstein cites a letter from a missionary teacher to Beecher: "the refinements of society, the wealth or honor of earth, cannot attract me from this isolated spot so long as God has work for me here" (2016, pg. 30). The missionary teachers felt it was their duty as white women to save the people of the west from their savagery and wicked ways. Most of TFA corps members are recent college graduates who believe in sacrificing the start of their destined career or graduate school (usually in other fields) in order to participate in the two-year teaching experience, seen as missionary work. The majority of corps members leave their home states to travel to a new state for the corps experience. The communities that corps members serve are labeled as high-need areas, which create a negative connotation, just as 19th century western United States held. Upon the arrival of Beecher's missionary teachers in the West, communities, families, and students were not fully accepting to these white female teachers sent to educate and religiously convert their communities. Today, TFA receives similar pushback from the communities they serve and educational scholars and practitioners

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

As a black Teach for America alumna analyzing my experience of TFA's handling of White Lady Bountiful, I aspired to evaluate how my experience aligns with the findings and stances of education researchers and theorists. Here, I review the present conversations on the White Lady Bountiful archetype, the correlation of TFA and White saviorism in popular culture, and conversations regarding race, diversity, and privileged backgrounds in TFA.

#### ***Catalyst of research: Meiners's work on White Lady Bountiful***

Erica Meiners, in "Disengaging from the Legacy of Lady Bountiful in Teacher Education Classrooms" (2002), provides a strong catalyst for the research and analysis of the white Lady Bountiful teacher in teacher education. She examines and analyzes several works connected to the historical contexts of white women in teaching and social work professions as ways to colonize in Canada and the United States. In the article, Meiners uses Harper's work on the relationships white women, education, and colonialism to describe the term, white Lady Bountiful teacher: "The white lady teacher is charged, implicitly, with colonizing her 'native' students and molding them into good citizens of the republic (or the crown, in Harper's context)" (87). Initially, the white lady teacher was utilized to educate "British working class women in religion, morality, and

hygiene,” as quoted from Harper’s work (p. 87). However, the locus of the white lady teacher expanded with British colonization. Meiners also provides the historical context, from historians Maria Danylewycz, Beth Light, and Alison Prentice, of Lady Bountiful in Ontario, during the early nineteenth- and twentieth-century as women were the “ideal bodies to reproduce patriarchal values and colonial epistemologies but not to challenge these frameworks” (p. 87). Meiners provides the connection to early Western U.S. colonization and Lady Bountiful as young, white, single women were tasked as ‘republican mothers’ and common school teachers under Catherine Beecher. These women, described by Martusewicz as “unmarried bourgeoisie women,” were tools of nation development (p. 88). Since colonization, this image of white Lady Bountiful teachers has greatly impacted social work professions and teacher education and, specifically, how American culture view teachers. Meiners provides a brief example of the cultural impact with Michelle Pfeiffer in *Dangerous Minds*, a Hollywood film that features Pfeiffer, “tousled blonde head” who saves her urban, “at-risk” students (p. 88).

Meiners exemplifies the importance of addressing this archetype in teacher education with her experience with her undergraduate students in the College of Education at a public university in Chicago. As Meiners analyzes the brief introductions of her students on the very first day of school (one, that asks students to introduce themselves and provide context as to why they are “here”), she finds that the Lady Bountiful figure is “invoked by the majority of [her] female students and perhaps all of our imaginations” (p. 89).

Throughout the article, Meiners relates the Lady Bountiful archetype in social work and teaching to the ‘lady with the lamp’ image of British nurses created by Florence

Nightingale. White, well-to-do, and nurturing, Nightingale has been deemed the founding mother of modern nursing and archetype of women in the nursing profession. A British nurses' union chose to do away with the image by publicly proclaiming a banishment of the Nightingale archetype: however, Meiners asserts this could not work in education as there is no body to banish to fire. Meiners explains that the white Lady Bountiful teacher archetype is not just a legacy, but a ghost in the classroom that is "impossible to identify and harder to render visible" (p. 91). Instead, the questioning and illustration of the acquirement of white femininity are methods used in Meiners's undergraduate classes to query the white Lady Bountiful teacher archetype.

As I discuss the White Lady Bountiful teacher archetype in Teach for America in this paper, Meiners not only provides a resourceful connecting point to the alternative teacher certification program, but also reminds me of the challenge of deconstructing the 'natural desires' of becoming a teacher in traditional teacher education classrooms.

### ***The correlation of White savior, popular culture, and TFA***

Films and television shows have great capacity to shape the ideas and perceptions of public masses. There is a certain archetype of teacher most commonly displayed in Hollywood films about schools, specifically urban schools. Through critical race theoretical framework, Cann (2015) compares and analyzes the narratives in White teacher savior films (WTSFs) and TFA that create perceptions of successful teachers and their Black and Brown students at urban schools.

Derrick Bell (cited in Cann's work) originally conceptualizes interest convergence as a higher likelihood for "progressive legislation, policy, and social action" to succeed if a body "actually [supports]] the interests of those already in power" (290).



Cann extends Bell's theory, usually a concept for traditional teacher education analysis, to analyze alternative teacher certification programs, specifically, Teach for America, as "racist racial projects" (290). The application of interest convergence with TFA argues that although TFA seems to push an agenda of educating low-income youth, it acts as a gateway for White college grads to build their resume for graduate school and careers outside of education. According to Bell's definition of interest convergence and Cann's analysis, Teach for America converges their agenda with that of the white and privileged groups that enter the organization. Cann combines culturally responsive teaching theory of privileged, political White voices with *White savior industrial complex* from Cole's 2012 *Atlantic* article. This complex refers to White saviors who view themselves as a hero or "godlike savior" and view Africa as a "backdrop for White fantasies of conquest and heroism" (Teju Cole, 2012, cited in Cann, 2015, p. 291).

The films used in Cann's analysis were *Dangerous Minds* (1996), *The Substitute I* (1996), *The Substitute II: School's Out* (1998), and *Freedom Writers* (2007). In popular, Hollywood WTSFs, Cann finds key identifiers of that portray successful teachers in urban school settings: White, well-meaning, uncredentialed or newly credentialed, and inexperienced. These are some of the same qualities that new Teach for America corps members have after finishing their Summer Institute pre-service training.

Cann reviews educational literature on teacher background and identity and culturally relevant and critical care pedagogy. Cann counters the films and *TFA* narrative of good, effective teachers with numerous research studies that prove a teacher's race and background, training, and years of experience are important for student learning and success. To name a few: Dee (2014) found that both White and Black students perform

better when they are taught by teachers of the same race; Ware (2006) provides the racial and cultural identities found in the pedagogy of Black teachers is a large part of “unique instruction under which Black youth academically thrive (p. 301); Laczko-Kerr and Berliner (2002) found that students of fully certified teachers perform better than students of *TFA* corps members.

Good teachers of urban youth execute culturally relevant pedagogy and critical care for their students (p. 303). Cann examines the critical care theories and perspectives of Noddings (2008) and Valenzuela (1999) for urban youth. In Noddings’ work, the relationship between the cared for and carer is created by the listening of the heart and “the concerns of the cared for guide the work of the carer” (p. 304). On the other hand, Valenzuela looks at the absence of caring in urban schools with non-caring pedagogy that reflects “the over-concern with the impersonal, noninclusive, and culturally irrelevant” (p. 305).

Cann’s article brings into question what makes a good teacher and how White teacher savior films and *TFA* narratives create a perception of the type of teacher whom Black and Brown youth in urban schools need. This study provides a solid foundation for an analysis on Teach for America, the role of media, and the White savior complex; however, what is missing is the White Lady Bountiful archetype ever present in both traditionally trained teacher and Teach for America corps members. The concepts of interest convergence and the White savior complex explain the unspoken presence of White Lady Bountiful in Teach for America. These concepts provoke critical questions: From the perspective of a black female corps member, how does Teach for America perpetuate White Lady Bountiful? Where does this specific teacher archetype come

from? Since the organization is grounded in diversity, equity, and inclusiveness, how does Teach for America prevent White Lady Bountiful and White savior mentalities?

### ***Conversations on race and diversity TFA***

As Cann presents the critique that TFA and WTSFs create a racist and inaccurate image of what effective teachers of Black and Brown youth in urban schools, White (2016) includes the reality of Black teachers into the conversation of diversity in Teach for America. Diversity is a largely broadcasted core value of Teach for America's organizational mission and work. White (2016) asserts that the organization's "two-pronged structure," as an alternative certification program and active educational leadership and reform policy actor, contradicts their boasting teacher diversity agenda. Many education critics, administrators, teachers and communities blame the displacement and dismissal of veteran teachers on TFA and its influx of corps members in schools. As White (2016) explains, "TFA's celebration of diversity, however, will likely address its numerical gains in the representation of corps members of color, but not the relationship of these gains to the larger realities of teachers of color in regions where corps members are placed" (p. 3).

White's article examines much of the reality and plight of displacement that Black teachers in urban schools face as a result of Teach for America and its partners, networks, and policies. Though Hollywood films and TFA dominant narratives successfully implement the perception that effective teachers in urban settings are white and new, White's research displays another narrative necessary to highlight. Her research highlights the proven studies of the effectiveness of teachers of color in traditional teacher education and in TFA corps members of color (who represents a demographic

more likely to continue in education compared to their white counterparts). In the exploration of declining rates of black teachers in urban school settings, she cites organization policies and Black teacher decline in New Orleans, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. to support the claim that reorganization is the culprit of this declining teacher demographic. According to White (2016), “punitive nature and disruptive effects of reorganization fall heavily on ToCs [Teachers of Color], and Black teachers in particular” (p. 10).

In the “Teacher Turnover and TFA Corps Members of Color” section of White’s analysis, she builds onto the conversation of what successful and well-prepared teachers of Black and Brown youth look like. A study by Lapayese, Aldana, and Lara (2014) provides perspectives from 15 corps members of color who saw TFA’s effectiveness in what is referred to as a “racial know-how” for white corps members. This *racial know-how* is described as “condensed information about race, culture, and diversity in several sessions throughout summer training” (p. 26). The study also found that although corps members of color do leave the TFA program, they do not leave urban schools (p. 26).

With studies that show Black students (who are largely served by Teach for America corps members) perform better with Black teachers, White’s call to TFA presents an important analysis in their diversity agenda and training. A powerful call for the reorientation of Teach for America, as an organization, concludes White’s critical analysis:

TFA should consider extending its prowess and value for diversity to its own organizational ties, its partners and networks, and its policy commitments, and to work against contemporary forms of racial discrimination and marginalization

facing Black teachers, in both everyday practices inside schools and in the teacher workforce at large. (p. 29)

### ***Conversations on privileged backgrounds in TFA***

In an ethnographic interview study of 25 TFA corps members, Straubhaar and Gottfried (2014) present insight on the correlation of teacher recruitment and retention issues with characteristics of teachers. In their findings, the researchers analyze the most common characteristics of their interviewees, corps members in Los Angeles: competitive, high-performing, and committed to TFA's *one day* mission to end educational equity. Their analysis confirms my assertions, as well as that of critics, that TFA can function as a waiting room for careers and graduate school for white, privilege recent college graduates. The researchers assert that "TFA is indeed attracting a common set of teachers into low-income urban classrooms" (p. 643). The sample of corps members' characteristics correlate with the characteristics of those from privileged backgrounds: "high-achieving college graduates, particularly those who come from backgrounds of socioeconomic privilege, tend not to enter the teaching profession" (p. 643). Straubhaar and Gottfried's study (2014) briefly explore three characteristics that will be later explored and developed in this paper: Competitiveness and high-performing qualities relate to white privilege.

The White savior/missionary complex directly correlates to the enthusiasm white corps members possess as they enter Teach for America for a short-term commitment with hopes to end educational equity. Though white corps members sacrifice time away from their lives, families, and graduate school futures, they see an appeal teaching underserved communities, because "it was perceived as an opportunity to give back to

the community but also an opportunity to push oneself in a fast-paced, highly organized working environment” (p. 644).

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY AND CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Meiners's (2002) analysis on the White Lady Bountiful teacher archetype sparked critical questions for this study: a) How have I seen TFA address the White Lady Bountiful teacher archetype? and b) What experiences have I had with White Lady Bountiful and white female Teach for America corps members compared to white female teachers from traditional teacher education programs? The Hollywood films that feature bright-eyed, white female teachers are true in representing the vast majority of teachers in American public schools. Just as these films demonstrate White Lady Bountiful and White savior complexes, white female in-service teachers have historically held the same views and mindsets.

In our current society, women rule the teaching profession in overwhelming numbers even in alternative certification programs, such as Teach for America. In the beauty and complexity of intersectionality, each female teacher holds a different perspective, identity, and background; however, the demographic of teachers continues to remain overwhelmingly white and female, while our student populations become more and more racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse. We must further analyze the role of white teachers and how it correlates with the White Lady Bountiful teacher archetype.

Teach for America recruits corps members to teach in high-need communities across the nation. The classrooms characterized in White Savior Teacher films, such as

*Freedom Writers* and *Dangerous Minds*, reflect the socioeconomic and racial makeup classrooms where a vast majority of TFA corps members teach. The proposed research questions evaluate the impact of Teach for America on these classrooms.

### ***Memory Work Research Approach***

This analysis utilizes the memory-work methodological approach as the main source of data collection in this study. This analysis adheres to the following summary of the three-phase memory work process, found in Onyx and Small's work (2001). Phase 1 involves the individual's reflection indicating constructions and analysis to discover further. Phase 2 involves the examination of memories and search for common understanding. In Phase 3 of the process, the memories and discussion are further analyzed (Onyx & Small, 2011, pgs. 775-777). Memory-work, a social constructionist and feminist approach, allows researchers to connect their own consciousness and experiences to theoretical research. Onyx and Small describe the method as a way to "break down the barriers between the subject and the object of research," where "everyday experience is the basis of knowledge" (2001, pg. 775). Bronwyn Davies uses a similar method in "Shards of Glass" (1993), her post-structuralist analysis on gendered identities in the discussions and memories of primary school children, her own childhood stories, and the writings of other writers on their childhoods. Davies positions herself within her research "as a way of getting inside the experience of being gendered as a primary school child" (1993, pg. xiii). In my analysis, I use popular cultural models (as Cann [2015] referred to them as WSTFs, White Savior teacher films) and existing research on *White Lady Bountiful* as an analytical framework to examine a collection of my memories and observations during my experience as a black female Teach for



America corps member. Here, the correlation of my memories and experiences as a minority with the socialization of Hollywood films leads the discussion on *White Lady Bountiful* in TFA's organization and training. The use of memory work in this analysis is not only symbolic of the missing narrative in TFA, an organization with only around 51 percent diversity (Teach for America, 2016), but also the absence of this particular perspective in the critique and research of educational scholars regarding TFA. Though there are numerous critiques and analyses of Teach for America and their mission and practices as an organization, the authentic narrative through experience of minority Teach for America corps members and alumni connected to existing educational research and theory are presently absent.

During Gender and Curriculum course in Master's program at Oklahoma State University, my professor assigned the reading of Meiners's (2002) and Goldstein's (2014) articles. As we discussed the depths of feminization, colonization, and Catherine Beecher's common schools, I began to recount my experience in Teach for America. As the only Teach for America-affiliated graduate student in the course, much of the conversation was based on *White Lady Bountiful* in traditional teacher education programs. I sat quietly as I continued to make the connections, while we discussed the racial and socioeconomic demographic of missionary teachers, their teaching placements in western America, their short preparation to teach proper, civilized learning materials, the conditions that deterred the teachers from staying—my thoughts whirled into a tornado of facts, experiences, and connections, but my classmates' emotional realization pulled me out of my thoughts. The face of Lara, one of my classmates, began to soften as she reflected on her experience in teacher education. Her face explained that she was hurt

and emotional. In this epiphanic moment, Lara felt like everything she knew and desired about being a teacher was a lie. Lara realized that she did in fact enter teacher education with a White Lady Bountiful mentality: *to save those kids*. Lara's reflection and my experience in my Gender and Curriculum course inspired the qualitative memory-work approach for this analysis.

## CHAPTER IV

### MEMORY WORK ANALYSIS FINDINGS

Just as Catherine Beecher prepared her young, upper-class female white teachers for the conditions of the West before their missionary teaching journey, Teach for America prepares corps members for their corps experience with a summer training, familiarly coined as “Institute.” We received a virtual package of preparatory materials, known as “Pre-Work,” to complete before arrival at Institute, on educational inequity, institutional systems, allyship, leadership personal identity, and content-specific teaching. As I completed the tedious material, I felt my excitement about becoming an educator and joining TFA’s mission to end educational equity grow; however, my excitement was halted by a portion of the Pre-Work that represents my first encounter in the following memory with White Lady Bountiful in Teach for America:

#### Memory #1

I was sitting on the bed with piles of papers encircling me and my yellow, legal notepad. I remember feeling the cool breeze of air-conditioning juxtaposed with faint warmth from the beaming sun outside my window. Graduation was so recent--I was still waiting for my conferred degree to come in the mail from Georgia State University-- and I remember such excitement that I wanted to clutch each of the papers around me. These papers were Summer Institute’s Pre Work: a collection of articles, notes, and guidance for preparing for summer training and eventually becoming a teacher. I remember thinking, wow, TFA really wants us to prepare for Summer Institute. I had no idea what I’m supposed to know as a teacher (but will I ever?), so I was just excited to at least *feel* like I had prepared in some ways, even if it meant watching KIPP success videos and classroom management

models. I was zealous about completing each assignment--except one: "Read 'Uprooting Racism' by Paul Kivel." I had already heard frustrations linked to Kivel's book from corps members (CMs) of color on the Facebook group page the 2015 corps members made months before moving to Oklahoma. I wasn't too thrilled about adding this book to my growing personal library, so I asked one of my fellow CMs to email me her PDF copy. As soon as I opened the PDF file, my eyes wandered until I found the first line of the Introduction: "This is a book about racism for white people." My face flattened, and I thought, "Welp! I guess I can stop reading now. I'm not white, and, believe me, I know more about racism than any book can contest." I never read the book.

The assumption presented in the first line of Kivel's (1995) book shocked me—

Teach for America assumed I needed to read a book to understand racism. Furthermore, TFA assumed I was a part of their largest demographic: white people. Kivel writes "Uprooting Racism" from the perspective of a white male ally, but I remember asking myself, *where is the perspective of a demographic that represents the student population we would soon be serving?* I am not critiquing Kivel's book or the white-splaining points he makes nor am I condemning that TFA attempted to provide diversity, equity, and inclusiveness training to white corps members before entering classrooms of black and brown students. Ultimately, this portion of our Pre-Work reeked of colonization.

Once I congregated with other Black corps members at Summer Institute, our amusement and disturbance of Kivel's book as *our* Pre-Work was the initial bonding moment. As a Black woman, a demographic once identified by Malcolm X as the most disrespected, unprotected, and neglected person in America, and a product of a small, rural, and inherently racist Southern town, I know racism all too well. As I spoke with my fellow Black corps members, I was reminded that no matter Southwest or Northeast regional upbringing, urban or rural, impoverished or upper-class, we shared common stories and experiences of racism. Each person, including our students, holds a different experience, and one cannot account for the experience of another. However, we held the common beauty, pain, and understanding of what it means to be Black in America. We

did not need preparation on how to sympathize with our Black students or how to serve as an ally or advocate. We were already advocates.

One of my favorite life lessons stems from a simple air passenger procedure. In case of change in air pressure, passengers are advised to put their oxygen masks on their face before helping others. One cannot help others before helping themselves. Critical race theorists and multicultural education scholars (Banks, 2004; Brown, 2004; Gay, 2010) assert that self-acceptance, self-concepts, and self-acceptance are the key foundation of antiracist work and advocacy. A person must understand their own identity, background, and biases before understanding that of others. With this in mind, Teach for America's Pre-Work urged corps members to develop a "narrative about a past challenge you've faced" called "Story of Self." In the next memory, I reflect on the perpetuation of White Lady Bountiful and White Savior complex during "Story of Self" during Summer Institute.

#### Memory #2

The facilitator of our first session walks in, and asks us: "What's your story?" Immediately, we vivaciously engross in sharing our individual stories for joining Teach for America and why we want to teach students in high-need areas. Though voices are raspy from the exhaustion of traveling from our familiar homes and moving to a new place, the room is filled with passion and zeal as we share our stories. With my sharing partner, I outlined my story:

*"I wanted to create a space for young people of color to find and understand their authentic voice in a world that underrepresents and misrepresents them. I grew up in a small, rural town south of Atlanta, called Zebulon, Ga, where I hardly ever saw examples of success from people that looked like me. My mother and grandmother were educators who grounded me in self advocacy and social justice. They sacrificed the negativity that surrounded the small African American community amid the large White population, but combated the negativity and low societal expectations with ambitiously high expectations for me as a person, student, and world citizen. Whenever I was told 'no' in my goals, dreams and wonders, my family made sure I looked for a 'yes.'*

*Growing up, I never understood the 'why' behind what my mother instilled in me--I just took it into second nature--until 5th grade. In 5th grade, I battled with a highly*

*prejudiced teacher, named Mrs. Johnson, and instantly became my own self advocate as the only Black child in my classroom (a reality I faced every year I stepped into a classroom in my hometown). She consistently showed me that I was not expected to succeed by her low expectations and by the way she ignored my desires to be mentored and taught, rather than ignored and picked on.*

*Mrs. Johnson is the reason I want to become a teacher. I will never deter a child from his or her dreams. As a 3rd grade teacher this summer, I hope to instill self-advocacy and confidence in their academic career.”*

My partner smiles at my story, and begins to share her journey to teaching with me: she is an Oklahoma native and daughter of Persian immigrants. Her story stems from her passion for social justice for all, especially immigrant students. I am instantly inspired.

As I listened to the other stories of white corps members, an uneasy feeling surfaced. Similar to my story and my sharing partner’s story, many of their stories turned into an outline of their journey to teaching; however, their stories greatly differed from ours. In my recollection of the stories from my white counterparts, two thematic commonalities of White Lady Bountiful were present: 1) a Savior mentality based on previous missionary experiences or expectations of missionary work and 2) the idea of marginalized students as challenges to overcome.

Many of the stories shared by the racially diverse population of corps members included narratives of overcoming poverty or other oppressive systems associated with race. Therefore, the Pre-Work materials that briefly outlined an understanding of poverty and oppression was redundant. For some of our White counterparts, this was their first time acknowledging White privilege and understanding oppression and racist systems, so many of their stories followed the self-centered White savior narrative of utilizing this new information to make change and save minority students from the oppressions of society. Their stories reminded me of LouAnne Johnson’s emotional scene with a student

in *Dangerous Minds*: “You asked me once how I was gonna save your life. This is it. This moment.” This scene seemed to be the outcome White corps members were hoping for in their corps experience. In the stories of white female corps members, they also called upon their experience in missionary trips to help them understand the lives and oppressions faced by the minority students they would soon teach in Tulsa and Oklahoma City. The stories echoed Johnson’s missionary attitude towards minority students. As a white woman, she felt her students could only escape the grips of poverty and gang violence with her help and saving.

Straubhaar and Gottfried (2016) found in their study that most TFA corps members, especially those from privileged racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, are “idealistic, organized, ambitious, and [are] eager to push their personal growth in challenging situations” (p. 639). The stories of my White counterparts mirrored the ideals and mentalities found in this study. I first heard the following mantra from my Summer Institute roommate: “If I can survive TFA, employers will know I can survive anything.” However, this mantra became a common saying amongst White corps members.

First, survival of TFA meant that corps members would gain a strong resume booster with skills that included competitive soft and hard skills. In my reflections now, I see that this mantra held an unspoken understanding among the privileged. This mantra now provokes me to imagine how this *really* plays out in life after the two-year corps experience. I can imagine a White TFA alumni proudly reflecting on the challenge of teaching in urban areas as they sit in a competitive graduate school interview or a job interview. The manager nods with approval as they both understand the sacrifice this

young person survive such harsh conditions as a teacher in an urban school and halted their potential career to give back to such a community.

Prospective, active, and alumni corps members view their TFA classrooms and their students as a challenging feat. In modern society, Hollywood images of in *Dangerous Minds* and in *Freedom Writers* lead the cause for White Lady Bountiful teachers with this mentality. Johnson and Gruwell not only share the previously discussed characteristics of TFA corps members; they share the desire to push their own personal growth in difficult situations, which is seen as their students. This White Lady Bountiful mentality views the Black and Brown students, commonly negatively referred to as “those kids” by teachers, in urban classrooms as just another challenge to overcome. Another speed bump to add to your “Story of Self.”



## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

During this memory work analysis, I found that I was consistently connecting to White Savior teacher films, such as *Dangerous Minds* and *Freedom Writers*. In this section, I will utilize the films to further discuss how they function as a working road map for the White Lady Bountiful in Teach for America.

#### ***Teacher films as a TFA road map***

First, the films both illustrate the power of the White Lady Bountiful teacher archetype and create an inaccurate narrative that follows White's (2016) findings in the research of TFA's diversity initiative: that only white, female teachers with little teaching experience, can effectively teach (and save) Black and Brown youth in inner city schools. This is untrue. Within the realm of Teach for America, these films act as an example of how teaching "in the hood" looks for prospective and current corps members who do not share the same racial and socioeconomic statuses of their students. Second, these films provide insight of the plight and oppression faced by Black and Brown students in low-income, urban communities. TFA's pre-work materials attempt to capture the essence of poverty, educational inequity, and racial issues in order to ground corps members in the experiences of their students. Third, there is investment in a character in which corps

members see themselves: the white, female teacher; she illustrates the panacea, according to Hollywood, to educational equity. Her students are just another challenge, if not the first, she faces. If she can get through to them, she can do anything. Aronson (2017) points to the “hegemonic project of whiteness” as she explains the dissonance with Hollywood teacher films. White savior industrial complex, and her experiences as a white female teacher.

She notes that embeddedness of hegemonic project of whiteness, which “implies a situation where the historical norm exercises authority over subordinate groups,” instilled a belief that a “good heart” and “good intentions” could solve an obstacle she found in her classroom (pgs. 39-40). This account points to the understanding that the White Lady Bountiful teacher archetype is problematic, because it highlights the self-centered nature also found in the White savior mentalities. White Lady Bountiful quickly identifies the problems that her students face, be it gun violence, poverty, teen pregnancy, or gang violence. Her cure for her students’ plight is colonization; she fixes their dim future with the curriculum she teaches. This mentality, just like the White savior industrial complex, provides emotional satisfaction for White Lady Bountiful. In a tweet featured in his *The Atlantic* article, Teju Cole explains the self-centered satisfaction as he tweets: “The white savior supports brutal policies in the morning, founds charities in the afternoon, and receives awards in the evening” (2002).

### ***TFA and Beecher’s missionary teachers***

Traditional teacher education programs and teacher certification programs share commonalities that perpetuate the White Lady Bountiful archetype. The majority of pre-service and in-service teachers in America are white women; they are the heads of

diverse classrooms; they teach mostly mandated curriculum that is poised as the great equalizer for marginalized students. An inconsistency of critical consideration and value for training about diversity, social justice education, and multicultural education in pre-service teacher education could explain the prominence of White Lady Bountiful in traditionally trained teachers. Teach for America professional development and corps member training includes diversity, social justice education, and multicultural education; however, in my analysis, I found that the model of Teach for America encourages and perpetuates the White Lady Bountiful archetype in the white, female teaching community. Much of the White Lady Bountiful archetype is present before corps members ever enter the classroom of their teaching placement. It is found in recruitment measures, pre-work materials, and “Story of Self.”

TFA paints a grim picture of the “high need” regions (Alabama, Buffalo, Las Vegas Valley, Mississippi, and St. Louis) that need “life-changing leaders.” The term “life-changing,” found on Teach for America website under the *Where We Work* section, perpetuates a savior mentality. First, the term assumes that the children’s lives in these communities need a change. That change is a teacher. Reformer Catherine Beecher sent her white, female missionary teachers into the west during the 19th century with this idea of colonizing in mind. “Life-changing” asserts that corps members, who once again are predominantly white and female, possess something that will save the current lives of students in America, especially the areas labeled as “high need.”

Just as Beecher’s month-long training for her missionary teachers prepared missionary teachers for the uncivilized communities of the West, TFA’s pre-work materials attempt to prepare corps members to teach a certain demographic of students:

underprivileged Black and Brown youth in low-income communities. The brevity of a condensed package of preparatory materials frames a mindset of missionary work. The pre-work, as seen in the Kivel reading assignment of my corps pre-work, assumes that corps members are white and need an understanding of racism and its institutionalized impact. In fact, the pre-work provides a brief overview of race and identity which confirms the assumption that white teachers are the panacea for Black and Brown youth and whatever they do not know, they will learn during their experience as Johnson and Gruwell did in their respective teacher films.

### **Conclusion**

Memory work analysis from the perspective of the researcher's experiences as a TFA corps member in this paper provides a lens that is not presently used in educational research and critique of Teach for America. This specific analysis helped analytically answer the two initial questions regarding the presence of the White Lady Bountiful teacher archetype in Teach for America: a) How have I seen TFA address the White Lady Bountiful teacher archetype? b) What experiences have I had with White Lady Bountiful and white female Teach for America corps members compared to white female teachers from traditional teacher education programs?

Teach for America's model and training materials perpetuate the self-centered, missionary nature of White Lady Bountiful. White Lady Bountiful seemingly illustrates the nature of teaching: to change a student's life and help students create a better future with the tool of education. This teacher archetype has been ingrained into our society through cultural models of the effective teacher whom marginalized students desperately need in order to survive and flee their harsh communities. This image could explain the

influx of white women into the profession. Since the 19th century reformation led by Horace Mann and Catherine Beecher, it has been a white woman's duty and nature. Historically, the lack of diversity in American school's curriculum writes the narrative that makes white teachers think they need to save a demographic that has historically been oppressed. But, that is another analysis for another day. The presence of the white female teacher as White Lady Bountiful and the terminology associated with White Lady Bountiful teaching practices and mindsets (such as TFA's recruitment terms: "life-changing" and "high-need") sends a message to the Black and Brown youth that their communities are a problem. White Lady Bountiful highlights what she perceives as uncivilized behavior in her students, which simply counters traditional White supremacy, and teaches students to pursue an education to flee their communities, instead of instilling the values to come back and create the change they wish to see.

So how do we combat White Lady Bountiful in Teach for America? Does the organization take the approach of the British nurses' union with the "Lady Bountiful" nurse archetype depicting the work and success of Florence Nightingale, and pronounce the discontinuation in the acceptance of such an image? Should TFA openly accept, acknowledge, and dismantle the unsaid presence of White Lady Bountiful within corps members?

If TFA truly desires uniqueness from traditional teacher education programs, the answer is yes. Much of the race, diversity, and equity training in TFA is exclusively created for white corps members to prepare for their diverse classrooms. Why not start with reexamining the presence of missionary mindsets in their recruitment efforts? One of my challenges for the organization is to rewrite the inaccurate narrative of what a

successful, effective teacher in increasingly diverse classrooms. The current recruitment efforts appeal to white people who want to help save the underprivileged or want a new and exciting challenge. The self-centered nature and defining narrative of TFA focused on the brightest and the whitest which could be a factor that dissuades diversity in recruitment.

But, diversity *is* a key component in countering the White Lady Bountiful teacher archetype and rewriting the narrative of effective teachers. Aronson (2017) recounts her memories as a teacher—one that aspired to be the well-intentioned Gruwell from *Freedom Writers*—and reflects on how she combatted this damaging mentality. In her 2017 article, she writes:

I am indebted to my education and the people [of] Color who have taught me along the way (whether intentional or not), because I do not know where I would be, or what kind of teacher I would be now without these experiences. (pg. 38)

The majority of teachers in Teach for America and traditional teacher education are white, and White Lady Bountiful is still strongly perpetuated hundreds of years after the work of Catherine Beecher and Horace Mann. What is the true missing piece?

Accountability. Perspective. The employment of Black and Brown classroom teachers and professors, instructors, and facilitators in teacher education combats the White Lady Bountiful teacher archetype. As Aronson found, working in areas where she, as a white person, was the minority and the graduate courses she took in Critical Race Theory, helped in her awareness of the perpetuation of White savior mentalities in pedagogy. Many times, corporations and schools create more diverse settings for accountability and perspective; however, we need to move beyond conversations that merely scratch the

surface and call for a Black or Brown voice in room of white people. Black and Brown teachers, professors, instructors, and facilitators are not tokens who help white people understand the struggles and lives of people of color. Instead, they present to their peers a different way of thinking about education because of their culture and experiences.

### **Implications for TFA corps members and traditional teacher education**

Students need teachers that look like them. We get that, and I am hopeful that my work, as well as the work of Cann (2015), White (2016), and others questioning and demanding the issue of diversity in education will foster this change in classrooms across America, no matter the certification outlet. In my memory work analysis, I found that the work to combat White Lady Bountiful begins before a teacher ever steps foot into a classroom. In traditional teacher education and Teach for America, accountability and perspective are imperative in stopping further perpetuation of the White Lady Bountiful archetype.

I challenge Teach for America and traditional teacher education programs to recognize the power of people of color in education, whether classroom teachers or university faculty and utilize this power to combat White savior/missionary mindsets in your corps members or pre-service teachers. In order to begin the process, I provide a perspective that reflects people of color in education and a common mindset I have heard from white teachers in graduate studies program. My hope is that these two implications will begin your conversation, whether you are a TFA corps member, TFA staff member, pre-service traditional teacher or teacher educator, on eliminating the ghostly presence of White Lady Bountiful in your program and your classroom.

Racial development theories for people of color (Cross, 1991) reflect simultaneous stages and every person of color is not, as we now say, *woke*, Black teachers, based on my collected experiences, enter their teaching careers with a common perspective. They have had to think, see, and potentially avoid race and white privilege. Teachers of color bring their perspectives and experiences into their classrooms. Based on their experiences as students in classrooms, teachers of color do not view their position as a teacher as a saving grace.

Representation truly matters for students. It helps Black and Brown students know that their future is not determined by their skin color and that they are seen and heard. One of my current eighth grade students left a note on my desk: "Thank you for being here. Thank you for letting me feel like I can be myself in this classroom." This is the experience Black and Brown students receive when they have teachers that look like them. In a profession that is dominated by whiteness, it is important for white teachers to understand the experience of Black and Brown students in their classroom. All Black and Brown students may not receive a teacher of their own race. This is where pre-service training in teacher education and TFA preparation is necessary in discontinuing the perpetuation of White Lady Bountiful.

As previously mentioned, my Gender and Curriculum classmate, Lara, realized she pursued a career in teaching with a White Lady Bountiful mindset. White female teachers like Lara, a traditionally trained educator, hold a responsibility in understanding their initial desire for becoming a teacher. What was your journey to teaching, and have you considered your diverse students and their experiences before ever stepping foot in their classroom?



In my graduate studies in Oklahoma, I have heard countless stories of traditionally trained white teachers, ranging from first-year teachers to 23-year veterans, who claim they never *had to think* about race and white privilege until their graduate studies in education. These narratives reveal an issue in traditional teacher education. Our country's growing diversity should be a call to consistency and accountability in teacher education programs that undergraduate courses on content delivery, child psychology, and classroom management are just as necessary to a pre-service teacher's budding career as theoretical studies on race, diversity, and white privilege and practical applications of social justice education, multicultural education.

Our public school student population is projected to grow more diverse, while the teachers that lead these classrooms are expected to remain white. TFA has immense power and agency in social change and academic achievement. The recruitment, retention, and preparation of Black and Brown teachers is necessary for students to see representation in the classroom and become exposed to more perspectives; but, ultimately, the exposure to true diversity can stop White Lady Bountiful in her tracks. Rather than belittle her, these tools will educate her to understand the white privilege, saviorism, and White Lady Bountiful in teaching.

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